

[Mountain Sharecroppers]

February 16, 1939

Jake Mack (white)

Valley Street

Emma, N. C.

Day laborer, sharecropper

Anne Winn Stevens, writer.

Douglas Carter, reviser.

MOUNTAIN SHARECROPPERS Original Names Changed Names

Jake Mack Jake West

"Mother Mack" "Mother West"

Julia Plemmons Julia Simmons

Frank Wells John Arnold

Turkey Creek Duck Creek

Mike Kelly Pat Reilly

Lon Robert's Luther Rance's

Henry Plemmon's Tom Carter's

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Captain McDonald Captain Mason

Thomas Edison Mack Thomas West C9- N.C. Box 1

MOUNTAIN SHARECROPPERS

From the highway that traverses the village, there diverges at right angles a muddy, red-clay road, a mere gash between low hills. For the sake of identification, the bus drivers call this road Valley

Street. It is fringed by dingy, four-room shacks, some of which are surrounded by a few acres of field, whose chief crop seems to be corn. Here and there a bony cow is staked out to graze, or a few chickens of no distinguishable breed scratch in the red mire.

One of these shacks has a curiously pied appearance, because it was originally painted a dark red, and later whitewashed, and now the whitewash, long discolored, has flaked off in patches. Shading the porch are two silver poplars, which seem to have sprung up quite by accident. From one of these hang sprays of an unpruned rose vine. Here and there through the muddy clay of the yard, clumps of jonquils begin to show green in

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From the highway that traverses the cattlement called Emma. village, there diverges at right angles a muddy, red-clay road, a mere gash between low hills. For the sake of identification, the bus drivers and the taxi drivers call this road Valley Street. It is fringed by dingy, four-room [?] shacks, some of which are surrounded by a few acres of field, whose chief crop seems to be corn. Here and there / a bony cow staked out to graze, or a few chickens of no marked distinguishable breed scratch in the red mire.

One of these shacks has a curiously pied appearance, because it was as if it had been originally painted a dark red, and [?] later white - washed , and / Now the white - wash, long discolored, has flaked off in patches. Shading the porch are two silver poplars, which seem to have sprung up quite by accident. From one of these hang sprays of an unpruned rose vine. Here and there through the muddy clay of the yard , clumps of jonquils begin to show green in mid-February.

Ragged, sodden cornstalks stand in the few acres of surrounding field. In this unkempt setting live the Macks. Wests.

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The interior of the house is as shabby as its exterior. Discolored plastering has fallen off in spots. A double bed fills one corner of the living room. The limp curtains are of cerise gauze , over red and yellow window shades. Only one small, faded rug is on the rough [board?] floor. At the time of my first visit a multiplicity of calendars surrounded the mantel, and on the opposite wall hung a single huge / red-cardboard heart, the relic of some grandchild's school work.

On a later visit, I became aware that the calendars and a few prints of Biblical subjects had been winnowed, and neatly distributed with a sense of proportion on the four walls, and the huge red heart had been pinned inconspicuously under the edge of one of the curtains. Some social worker had certainly improved the appearance of the interior.

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To a new - comer, Mrs. Mack's West's greeting is, "I am always pleased to meet any of the Lawd's people."

The Macks Wests [?] belong to a generation that in their childhood could be bound out, legally. "Mother Mack West, " as the neighbors now call her, Julia Plemmons Simmons as she was then known, was bound out at the age of ten 10 to a well-to-do farmer, Frank Wells John Arnold . Julia was the daughter 3 of a Turkey Duck Creek farmer, who , dying , left a wife and six children of whom Julia was the oldest. In the settlement his property for - he owned his own farm , - the Widow Plemmons Simmons was left penniless. Unable to support her children, she bound them out to neighboring farmers as soon as they were large enough to work. According to the terms of the contract, Julia was to be sent to school. But although Wells Arnold saw that his own children attended the / County / Schools , of that day Julia was taught neither to read , nor to write. She became a general houseworker in the Wells Arnold family.

Jake Mack West , to whom Julia was married at eighteen, had a similar experience. He was,a farmer's son from Turkey Duck Creek. He was [orphaned?] , and he was bound out to a farmer at Sand [?] of the Leslie section, / But he was given a little schooling, so that he learned to read, but not to write. He became a farm laborer until the contract , binding him out , expired , when he was eighteen 18 , two years after his marriage to Julia.

The reaction of the Macks Wests to the now obsolete custom of binding children out is curious interesting.

"Children was allus pervided with homes in those days," Julia [?] says earnestly. "They wasn't allowed to wander around from place to place and go hungry[.?]" and

Jake , Mack glancing up from under the brim of his ragged felt hat, which he keeps on when he comes indoors, nods agreement.

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After their marriage , and the expiration of the contracts which bound them, the Macks Wests drifted to the county seat Asheville as unskilled laborers. Julia took in washing. She bore nine children and raised seven of them. The children attended school a few years each, except the youngest daughter, who [still?] lives with her parents and earns two dollars a week looking after a neighbor's children.

“She was afflicted,” says Julia, “with white swelling , and was crippled; so she was kept out of school. Her memory is short; so she never learned how to read.”

Meanwhile, Jake Mack worked at various jobs, such as helping to lay water mains and sewer pipes, and opening up streets. Under the employment of Mike Kelly, Pat Reilly, , who had the contract for this work, Jake dug trenches ten 10 hours a day at a wage of seventy-five 75 cents. Later he was paid a dollar \$1 a day. “There was,” he says, “no loitering on the job; Kelly Reilly stood over us and watched us all the time.”

In 1916, the family left Asheville the county seat and became sharecroppers working on various farms near Emma and [?] nearby. “We worked on [??] Luther Rance's place, and on Henry Plemmons's Tom Carter's farm,” said Jake. “Sharecroppers was allus given the very poorest land. If the owner furnished seed and farm implements, he took half of what was raised. We made a bare living. The owner kep' the best land fur himself, or rented it out fur cash.”

The crops raised were diversified: corn, potatoes, cabbages, turnips, tomatoes, mustard , and other vegetables. “We allus planted corn on the first dark of the moon in March,” said Julia . Mack. “Crops planted on the bright of the moon grows spindling. The corn shoots up tall and goes all to leaves. The ears are stunted. Mustard planted on the bright of the moon goes all to stems. Plant it on the dark of the moon, and it grows low, and bushy, with plenty of leaves.”

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The sharecropper could, if he were inclined, raise pigs and chickens , / On the same terms as the crops [.] half of these went to the land owner "The work,"

said Jake, "was from sun - up to sun - down." To aid her family , Julia took in washing, making from six to eight dollars \$6 to \$8 a week. In the flu epidemic of 1918, she made as much as fifteen \$15 a week, "Ever body was afeard to wash clothes for them that had flu," she explained. "When I had washed the clothes and hung them out to dry in the mawnin', I would work all afternoon in the field. Sometimes I ironed until eleven 11 o'clock at night."

A woman of powerful frame and sound health, she often hired out by the day to do farm work, breaking off corn 6 6

tops and stripping fodder. She boasts: "I could allus do a man's work in the field, and get a man's wages."

"Yes, she could allus keep up with us men," her husband added proudly.

For stripping fodder and other field work , the men with whom Julia kept up were paid fifty 50 cents a day. "The women who lagged and couldn't keep up got twenty-five 25 cents a day."

The Macks Wests finally gave up share - cropping, after having worked as sharecroppers from 1916, as well as they can remember, until 1929. "We couldn't make a living that way," said Jake, "the owners wanted to take all and leave the share - croppers nothing; so I took to peddling. I got a horse and cart and peddled vegetables in the summer, and apples or coal in the winter. When the roads in these parts was paved, I got a truck and kep' on a-peddling."

The Mack's West's eldest son remained in Asheville at the county seat and ran two rooming house , both in the business section. one on Broadway and Lexington, and the other on Biltmore Avenue. He was killed some eight years ago in a drunken quarrel with

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his wife, who struck him over the head with an iron pipe, so that he fell down a flight of stairs one of his his Broadway rooming house houses . At first his wife was exonerated, and his death charged to an accident.

Later, she confessed fully. Captain 7 7 Mcdonald Mason of the Salvation Army a welfare organization, says she confessed after having been converted by reading a copy of the "War Cry", a Salvation Army publication. a religious periodical. Julia Mack West thinks her confession was due to the sheriff's suspicions and unremitting questioning.

At any rate, she was sentenced to serve twenty 20 years in prison for manslaughter.

The youngest son of the Macks Wests , Thomas , Edison Mack, joined the army Army when he was very young. His mother says, "He was fourteen 14 years old, but was large for his years. He drove a car for some / Captain or other down in Mexico." As a matter of [government?] record, he spent two years in active service, first on the Mexican [border?], and later for nearly a year in France as an ambulance driver along the Hindenburg [line?]. He was in three offensives, and shortly before the [armistice?] was wounded in the hip. Honourably discharged, he returned to his parents. at [Emma?] It was his bonus that enabled them to buy from a Negro couple the shack and the few acres of land where they now live.

Later, he was run over at a railway crossing , by a train, being so absorbed in avoiding one train that he did not see the other comming coming from the opposite direction. He lost a leg thereby.

"The Gov'ment," says Julia , [?] "[give?] him a new leg."

He also [?] gets a small pension from the [army?], and , according to his mother, "lives near the depot in Asheville on [?] Robert Street, and drives a truck."

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Thomas Edison Mack was married to a woman conspicuous for flaming red hair. She deserted him and their sixteen 16 -month-old, red-haired daughter, Frances. The girl "was raised" by her grandparents in Emma . Julia Mack says, "She hates her red hair because it is like her mother's. She wishes she could paint it black. People tell her, because her hair is like her mother's, she will turn out the same way." This red hair is really the girl's one attractive feature. Frances, now eighteen 18 and married to a W.P.A. worker, has been raised was reared by her grandparents with the greatest strictness. "Until she was married," says Julia, "I never let her go anywheres unless her grandpappy or one of her aunts was along. She ain't never been to a moving picter, nor to a dance. She went to church and Sunday / School, right faithful." The Macks' forty Wests' 40 -year-old married daughter , who was present, asserted sanctimoniously, "I ain't never been to a moving picter, either." The girl, Frances , is the mother of a blue-eyed baby whom her grandparents are helping her "to raise." She lives in one of the drab shacks across Valley Street. Several of the Macks' Wests' married daughters and grandchildren live along Valley Street, also. They are all working on the W.P.A. , or dependent on the / Welfare department.

Julia and Jake raise corn, potatoes, tomatoes, mustard , and other vegetables on their strip of ground. So far as possible, they save seed from one year to the next, so they will not be out of both seed and money when planting time comes. They still plant "on the first dark of the moon in March," no matter how early or how late / that may be. "We allus has the ground plowed in February, so it can be plowed deep, and get mellow," they say. They keep a cow and chickens , and sell their surplus milk and eggs.

"I caint bring myself to sell milk to sick people , " says Julia. "They can come and get all they want." Neither can she sell her vegetables. "It don't look right to charge a neighbor for a mess of mustard , " she says.

In spite of their advanced years /- they are both in the early seventies /- the Macks Wests never call in a doctor. Jake , Mack, ruddy and white-haired , still carries himself erect.

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Weather-beaten and wrinkled as she is, Julia still walks with a firm step. Her scanty, gray hair is drawn back tightly from her large face. She wears loose, ill-fitting cotton dresses. She believes in old-fashioned remedies made of herbs, or of household ingredients. Her remedy for colds is "a stew made of vinegar, butters mollasses molasses, and pepper." But she admits it has failed to cure her recent bronchitis. 10 10

A staunch Baptist, Julia [Mack?] constantly affirms her convictions. "I am an ole woman that has allus stood for the right," she is fond of repeating. "I allus wanted to be somebody," she declares. "Even when I didn't have a dress to my back, I wanted to be somebody." Although she can not agree with the doctrines of "the Holy Rollers over to Turkey Duck Creek,"

she is tolerant of their "hikey-dykes." She disapproves strongly of all alchoholic alcoholic beverages. Jake declares he has never taken a drink. When drunken neighbors wander into their yard swearing, Julia orders them off. "Nobody is goin' to be allowed to insult my Lawd on my premises , " she says. She admits, "My sons drink [?] likker but I don't sanction it." Julia at seventy-five is Some of the family are learning to read. A W.P.A. teacher has gathered four of the family, them, Julia, Jake, and two of their middle-aged daughters , in the Mack West house for lessons twice a week. Although Julia's spectacles are ill fitted, so that her eyes smart when she uses them, she is actually learning. "I can read," she says, "better than I can pronounce." Her motive for this effort seems to be two - fold affection for the teacher, and a desire "to read the Word."

She and her husband get old-age compensation to the amount of fourteen dollars \$14 a month. They seem to regard it as their due.

Julia [Mack?] sums up their life history piously by saying, "We have had bad times, but we have had good times, too. I guess the Lawd gives me all I need; all I want might not be good for me."